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ABSTRACT

Jackdaws are collections of interesting artifacts that provide information about a particular subject, period, or idea, and build background and interest in works of literature for children. Jackdaws are easy to construct: practically anything that is related in some fairly direct way to a piece of literature and that can aid a student's comprehension or interest in a book is eligible, including photographs, recordings, movies, period songs or music, news articles, time lines and maps, biographical sketches of authors, and lists of related books. The teacher can introduce jackdaw items either as a prelude or as a conclusion to a book, or even at appropriate points in the the story. They can also be placed in a reading corner for independent exploration. As students become familiar with jackdaws, they can be asked to add to existing ones or to construct ones of their own, an excellent extension activity following the completion of a story or book. Students can then share their jackdaws with the class or in small groups. Preservice teachers who have used jackdaws in their classroom training report that the collections helped involve bored students, increased understanding, and made classroom discussions more vital. Jackdaws also seemed to attract students to books, a primary goal of reading instruction. (HTH)

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USING JACKDAWS TO BUILD BACKGROUND AND INTEREST FOR READING

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the concept of the jackdaw as it applies to reading instruction using children's literature. The jackdaw concept is defined as a grouping of artifacts related to a particular book for the purpose of building background and sparking interest in the book. A theoretical rationale that sees the jackdaw in terms of schema theory, that is the prior knowledge for reading, is developed. Items that might be included in a jackdaw are discussed. This is followed by a review of possible uses that the jackdaw could be put to in a reading program. Finally, a brief evaluation of actual jackdaw use in the classroom concludes the paper.

This paper introduces the concept of jackdaws as it applies to reading instruction and children's literature. Several questions will be addressed. First, I will try to define exactly what a jackdaw is. Second, I will try to show how the jackdaw concept fits into current reading theory. Third, I will discuss what constitutes a jackdaw. And finally, I will discuss the success we have had in using jackdaws with students.

A Jackdaw?

First a definition. Just what is a jackdaw? Jackdaws are collections of interesting artifacts that help to provide information about a particular subject, period, or idea. The term comes from the British name for blackbird, similar to the American grackle, that picks up brightly colored, interesting, and seductive objects and carries them off to it's nest. Jackdaws seem to have particular utility in building background and interest in pieces of literature for children. The idea itself is not new, nor is it unique. However it is one that few teachers use consistently or frequently, if they use it at all. Artifacts can be collected from a variety of modes to aid the understanding of particular portions of books. The elements of a jackdaw are synergistic in nature. That is, each individual artifact may add little to the students' background or understanding. Yet, when taken as a whole, the jackdaw can create a comprehensive background for reading and make a book come alive for many students. Implicit, then, within the jackdaw concept is a commitment to the use of literature in the reading program.

Jackdaws and Reading Theory

In a recent speech, Pearson (1983) outlined several important areas in reading research and theory that have come to light over the past decade.

One of these discoveries was that prior knowledge is a much more important determinant of reading comprehension than it was ever thought to have been. Prior knowledge could perhaps be even more important than IQ or reading achievement in determining comprehension. Translating this into practice, the inordinate amount of time that it takes to integrate the reader's background knowledge to the information in the text is extremely important and worth every minute.

In a similar view, Frank Smith (1982) feels that the information that the reader brings to the reading act (nonvisual, background information) is at least as important as the information presented in print (visual information). Indeed, there is a tradeoff occurring in reading in that the more background information that the reader possesses the less he has to rely on the printed text. Reading, in effect, becomes easier. He also asserts that children learn to read by reading. Three crucial jobs of the teacher then, according to Smith, are to help build background in the children for reading, to encourage wide and in-depth reading on the part of the children, and to stress reading for meaning.

Other researchers have suggested the same. Tierney and Spiro (1979) have argued that effective comprehension involves the simultaneous interaction between the reader's pre-existing knowledge on a topic and the information presented in the text. The major role of the teacher prior to the reading of the text is to build background for the students in areas of the text for which they have little knowledge.

Let us consider briefly the area of reading interests and comprehension. In a review of recent research literature concerning reading interest, Guthrie (1981) points out that materials that are of high interest to readers are more fully comprehended than materials of lower interest. Further, Guthrie reports that recent research tends to indicate that interest

emerges from a knowledge of a particular topic. That is, readers who have an interest in a given area appear to develop that interest from a knowledge base on tne topic. This interest and background, then in turn, appears to lead to higher degrees of knowledge and interest in the area through further reading and exploration.

Thus, it seems that there is support for the notion that two important roles for the reading teacher are to spark an interest in a topic and to build a background of information on the topic for students. This, I contend, is what jackdaws can help do for the reader. Perhaps a couple personal stories can best illustrate this point.

Two Experiences

I recently viewed some television documentaries on the life of Franklin D. Roosevelt. These programs seemed to cover the events of his life at a superficial level. Yet, the experience appeared to have activated an internal curiosity within me to learn more about FDR. This curiosity spanned several weeks as I read a number of books about the man and looked at more than a few depression era newspapers to get the flavor of the time. I found myself talking to my parents, relatives and neighbors about the depression. They showed me some of their memorabilia from the time. This, in turn, sent me back to more books. I found this personal research project to be greatly interesting and rewarding for me. Not only did the television documentaries pique my interest in FDR, but they also provided me with a background of knowledge on the man (i.e. a schema if you will) for reading and understanding some of the literature related to his life. This is how a jackdaw works. The interesting and alluring items in a jackdaw spark the reader's interest in the topic and provides her with a background knowledge for further reading.

In a somewhat different experience, a friend of mine took his family

on a vacation to historic Williamsburg, Virginia a few years back. Toward the end of the vacation his son picked out the book My Brother Sam is Dead by the Colliers as a souvenir of the vacation. This book deals with life during the Revolutionary War. Although the son was an average reader with average interests, he tore through this book. It became one of his favorite books, one that even now he still occasionally rereads. My friend is convinced that the major reason his son is so enraptured by this book is due to their vacation to Williamsburg which sparked an interest in Revolutionary times in the son and built for him a background of knowledge for the book.

Again, this is what the jackdaw does. The collection of artifacts helps to provide concrete and easy to understand information about a particular subject, period of time, or piece of literature.

What's Contained in a Jackdaw

Perhaps one of the most appealing characteristics of jackdaws is their ease in construction. Practically anything that is related in some fairly direct way to a piece of literature and that can aid a student's comprehension or interest of the book is eligible for inclusion. In making jackdaws the teacher may wish to consider what sorts of things --real, artifacts, facsimiles, photographs, audio recordings, movies, etc.-- might add to a deeper understanding of the book. The number and types of items to include in a jackdaw are limited only by one's imagination and creativity. Some items that might be contained in a jackdaw include:

1) Clothes of particular characters in a book, represented in a a catalogue, paper dolls, collages, old photos, etc.
2) Songs or music from a period or event depicted in a book. These may be in the form of sheet music, recordings, demonstrations, titles, or figures.

3) A news article form the period; real or a facsimile.

4) A time-line depicting the occurence of events in a book (may also include real-world events not mentioned in the book).

5) A map showing any journeys that the main characters made.

6) Recipes and food dishes typical of the time periods depicted in the book.

7) Selected poems that reflect the theme of the book.

8) A glossary of interesting or peculiar words found in the book.

9) Dioramas that illustrate particular scenes from the story.

10) A biographical sketch of the book's authors.

11) A list of other related books (by story, theme, characters, etc.) that students can read in order to extend their literacy experiences.

The number and types of items that can be added to this list are endless. The main criteria to be used in selecting an item for a jackdaw are these: it must be related to the book in some definite way; and the item must have some interest value or attraction for the students.

It seems that jackdaws tend to work best with books of an historical nature. However, our experience has shown that with a bit of creative brainstorming, they can be constructed and used with almost any type of book, from informational to fantasy.

Working with Jackdaws

How, then, can a teacher use a jackdaw with his or her students? Several possibilities come to mind almost immediately. As the teacher reads aloud to her students she could introduce items from the jackdaw, either in total during the introduction of the book or item by item at appropriate places during the story.

Jackdaws can be used with small groups of students silently reading the same book. As the group gathers to periodically discuss portions of

the book, items from the jackdaw could be introduced as discussion starters or to enhance the discussion.

Jackdaws might be placed in a "reading corner" of the classroom. As individual students tackle books that have associated jackdaws they might explore the contents of the jackdaw on their own. Such a personal encounter with the jackdaw could only add to a student's delight and understanding of the book.

As students become familiar with jackdaws they can be asked to add to existing ones or even to construct ones of their own. This would be an excellent extension activity following the completion of a story or a book. Students could then share their jackdaws with the whole class or small groups. Such presentations would entice other students to read the same book, and to make additions to the jackdaw. Older students might enjoy constructing jackdaws for children in the lower grades. This would be particularly useful in getting older poor readers involved in easier books to build their power in reading. In order to construct a jackdaw the builder must have read the book and understand it fully.

The construction of jackdaws might be a very appropriate and valuable way to involve parents and volunteers in the reading program. Indeed, jackdaws could be an easy way to get parents and children involved together with books. The jackdaws provide a neat springboard for talking about books between parents and students.

Do they work?

What can a teacher expect from using jackdaws with a class? Several students from my reading-methods course have used jackdaws with elementary students in their field activities. These teachers-in-training report several very positive consequences of making and using jackdaws with their students.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of using jackdaws in classrooms that was reported by the teachers-in-training was a feeling of enjoyment or fun in reading. Both teachers and students found that the jackdaws added a certain life to books. The hands-on-items in the jackdaws made many books seem more real. The teachers noted that they even had a good deal of fun in putting the jackdaws together. They saw it as something of a scavenger hunt. I'm sure elementary students would see the making of their own jackdaws from a similar perspective.

Many students seemed to take an added interest in the books associated with jackdaws. Students who seemed bored or who at best took a passive role in reading books often took on an active participant role, bringing in items from home that could be shared and added to the jackdaw.

Understanding of books also seemed to increase with the use of jackdaws. Classroom discussions of books appeared to have a greater vitality and to reach greater depths and wider horizons than earlier discussions without the jackdaws.

Finally, the jackdaws seemed to attract students to other books. Several teachers-in-training noted that students who were intrigued by a certain aspect of a book or an item from the jackdaw would often ask for other books that dealt with their particular interest.

Jackdaws are certainly no cure-all or panacea for reading and literature programs. No such claim is made here. But, I think, jackdaws do offer the teacher a supplementary set of materials and activities that can make reading books a little more real, a little more understandable, a little more interesting, and perhaps a lot more fun.

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